

St. Michael's, El Segundo  
August 24, 2025  
11th Sunday after Pentecost

Readings

*Jeremiah 1:4-10*

*Psalms 71:1-6*

*Hebrews 12:18-29*

*Luke 13:10-17*

In today's Gospel we heard about a time when Jesus was invited to teach in a synagogue, much as Fr. Joshua graciously invited me to preach at St. Michael's this morning. The writer of the Gospel of Luke, a physician, begins the story in the middle of his teaching, when Jesus noticed a woman in pain. Luke says: "just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight."

Now at this point, I can get distracted by clinical questions. My first career was in international health. I worked on maternal and child health projects in Africa for almost 30 years. So I'm curious about the woman. Was she elderly and bent over with arthritis? Maybe she was young but crippled by long hours working in the field with a short hoe? Or perhaps she suffered from a mental health problem? But this is not where Luke focuses our attention. Despite being a physician who recorded many healing stories about Jesus, Luke rarely spends time on the illness or disability of the person needing healing. Instead, he always wants us to pay attention to how Jesus treats them.

So, how did Jesus react when he suddenly noticed this woman in the group bent over in distress? Did he ignore her, or politely ask her to wait? No, Jesus immediately interrupted his teaching. Then he called the woman over and laid his hands on her. Jesus went from bad to worse. Physical contact with a woman who was not part of a man's family violated social norms. However, this doesn't seem to bother Jesus. He proclaimed, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment". Luke says that as soon as Jesus laid hands on her, the woman stood up straight, no longer bent over in pain, and began praising God for her healing.

And what about the leader who invited Jesus? Was he thrilled that this amazing healing had taken place in his synagogue? No, he was not! Whether the leader was jealous of Jesus, or didn't approve of rules being broken, or both, Luke tells us he was indignant. Apparently, he was angry with both Jesus and the woman because he grumbled: "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day."

Why does Jesus choose to be disruptive and offend the very person who invited him? Was he unaware of the rules concerning contact between unrelated men and women, or about not working on the sabbath? No, of course not. Jesus simply put a higher priority on relieving suffering. And far from being apologetic about what he had done, Jesus went on to scold the leader and those who supported him, calling them hypocrites. "Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from bondage on the sabbath day?"

Jesus was not wishy washy! Do you, by chance, remember the Gospel reading from last Sunday? The crowds gathered eagerly to hear Jesus, but he warned them that he had come, not to bring peace to earth, but rather division. In that encounter he warned that following him would provoke family conflict, setting “father against son, and son against father; mother against daughter, and daughter against mother” Jesus’ goal was not to disrupt families or to make synagogue leaders mad, but he knew that sometimes it’s necessary.

I don’t picture Jesus going to the synagogue that day intending to rock the boat, just that he was prepared to do so. Jesus was not willing to maintain the peace when it required ignoring suffering or failing to stand up for the oppressed. As I was preparing my sermon and reflecting on today’s Gospel, I remembered words of my grandfather’s that made a lasting impression. When I was young, Grandpa told me that what he regretted most in his life were his sins of omission rather than his sins of commission. Those words might have planted the seeds of my call to be a deacon.

Jesus teaches that peace is good, but not when peace is based on the oppression of many. Jesus teaches that obeying rules is good, but not when following the rules supports injustice for others. Jesus teaches that respecting religious leaders is good, but not when their words point us away from helping others. So if we take the teachings of Jesus seriously as guidance for our lives, sometimes we’re going to have to rock the boat; which brings me to deacons.

I was invited to St. Michael's to talk about deacons and our ministries. And I think I can safely set the stage by telling you that an important part of the job description of a deacon is to rock the boat. Or, more accurately, deacons are given the responsibility of reminding the church that there are times when the boats we find ourselves in need to be rocked.

At the ordination of a deacon (and it's worth remembering that all priests and bishops are first ordained as deacons) The Examination is read aloud. It officially describes the work of a deacon. You will find The Examination on page 543 in the Book of Common Prayer, but let me share the two instructions that I believe convey the essence of diaconal ministry. The bishop begins by telling the deacon "In the name of Jesus Christ, you are to serve all people, particularly the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely." Then a little further on, the bishop adds another important instruction: "You are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns and hopes of the world." As deacons we are messengers. We take the church out into the hurting world and we bring the needs, concerns and hopes of the world back into the church. That means deacons always walk with one foot inside the church and one foot outside. I promise you; this is not a comfortable way of walking.

At the moment, we have about thirty deacons serving in our Diocese, with several more in formation. Deacons vary in age and experience. A few are young but, for many deacons, their call to ordained ministry grew out of work they did before, as mine did out of my public health work in Africa.

The part of a deacon's role that is easiest to describe is what you see on Sunday morning. The liturgical roles of deacons are, for the most part, clearly established in the Book of Common Prayer. When a deacon is part of the worship team, he or she should be the one to read the Gospel, bid the Confession, set the altar for the Eucharist, clean the altar after the Eucharist and do the dismissal at the end of the service. Ask me afterwards why I believe "the dismissal" is the most important thing the deacon does.

However, the heart of a deacon's work is NOT what we do Sunday morning. It's what we do the rest of the week. A deacon's ministry in the world can take many forms. Deacons serve in jails, in recovery programs and in schools. Diaconal vocations include helping homeless folks get housed, helping sick people get health care and welcoming refugees. Right now, as you can imagine, many deacons in our diocese are standing up with and for our immigrant neighbors who are in danger.

Every deacon I know is willing, even eager, to provide humble hands-on service in the most marginalized, most neglected corners of human life. But deacons cannot, should not, do this work on their own. Deacons are ordained to serve as icons or catalysts for the *diakonia of all believers*, to which we all belong. Everyone, lay and ordained, has a role to play in diaconal ministry, but only a few are called to serve as ordained deacons.

I'm retired now, but for eight years, I had the honor of serving as the Archdeacon of our diocese. During that time I visited many churches to talk about the diaconate. I started out being a little naïve, imagining as soon as people heard about deacons, everyone would want to be one. However, I learned that being an ordained deacon is not for everyone. The work is never ending, the pay is poor to non-existent, and we mostly serve at the margins of the church, as well as at the margins of society. But I can also tell you that it has been one of the greatest blessings of my life to have served as a deacon for the last 23 years.

So I'm going to close with a little boat rocking of my own. I believe there is someone here this morning, at St. Michael's, whom God is calling to be a deacon. It doesn't matter if you are young or older. It doesn't matter if you've been part of the congregation for years or are visiting for the first time. It doesn't even matter if this is the first you've ever heard of deacons.

God can and does choose the most unlikely suspects. So keep your minds and hearts open. Look around. There's wonderful work to be done, and we would welcome you.